

And He Shall Direct Your Stops

Acts 16:1-10

Introduction

An old Model T Ford was pulled off to the side of the road with its hood up. A young man was trying desperately to get the old car cranked and running. He had been working at it for a long time without success, when a beautiful, chauffeur-driven automobile pulled up behind him, and a well-dressed gray-haired man got out. He watched the young man working for a moment, and then suggested that he make an adjustment in one part of the engine. The young man was skeptical, but nothing else had worked, so he did what he was told. “Now” said the man, “Your car will run. Crank it up.”

So the young man cranked it once and indeed, the engine started running again. The young man was amazed that this wealthy chauffeured gentleman knew so much about cars, so he asked, “How did you know exactly what to do to an old Model T?”

“Well,” the older gentlemen replied, “My name is Henry Ford. I made that car . . . and I know how it works.”

Who made you?

Isn't it apparent that the God who so creatively designed everything, including you, would know how your life is supposed to work?! He knows how the engine works and how fast it can go. He knows where the road is level and where it gets bumpy. He knows how you handle sharp turns. He knows how to maneuver you through busy traffic.

In God's design for your life, He also knows where the delays are and when and where you will have to stop. In fact, He does not just know, He designed these stops!

In God's plan for the way your life is to work, in fact, the stops are as important as the steps. Both are equally designed with as much purpose and meaning in your life.

To see this principle tested on the open road, turn to Acts, chapter 16, where the apostle Paul experiences it first hand.

Layover in Lystra – Enlisting a Recruit

Now, everything starts out as planned, as Paul and his new assistant, Silas, embark on a second missionary journey. Notice verses 1 through 3a of Acts, chapter 16.

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; . . .

For the moment, there is a brief layover in Lystra. While Paul is there, he is reunited with believers that had come to faith in Christ during his first missionary journey.

You may remember from our discussion of Acts, chapter 14, that it was in Lystra that Paul and Barnabas were mistakenly identified as Zeus and Hermes – two chief gods of the Pantheon. Rather than put on tank tops and flex their muscles, they admitted to the crowd the disappointing news that they were just ordinary men. It was not long afterward that the city turned into a mob and stoned Paul, leaving him only after they thought he was dead.

It was during those events in Lystra that a woman named Eunice, and her mother Lois, came to Christ. These two women had already been deeply devoted to Judaism. We know that because of the way Eunice had faithfully taught her son the Old Testament Law. In fact, in II Timothy, chapter 3, Paul refers to the fact that her son, Timothy, had been taught the sacred scriptures since he was a little boy. Paul writes in verse 15,

And that from childhood you [Timothy] have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

I point this out, as we pull over to the side and wait for this layover to end, in order to encourage every mom who is a single mom, or for that matter, to encourage every mother who is married to an unbeliever or to a believer who does not provide spiritual leadership. That status does not automatically mean your children are without hope or future value in the service of God.

Perhaps you could pray a prayer that Eunice probably prayed – a prayer for a godly man to become for her son, a mentor; a spiritual leader. It was a prayer that God answered. Keep in mind, however, that it was not answered until Timothy was in his late teens. At that time, Paul returned to Lystra and adopted Timothy as his son in the faith.

While Timothy's unbelieving father had tolerated his wife teaching their son the Old Testament Law, he had evidently put his foot down and would not allow her to have Timothy circumcised. So, when Timothy was invited by Paul to join the team, there was still the problem that Timothy had come from a mixed marriage and had not been circumcised. It becomes an issue that needs solving.

While the Jews would have recognized Timothy's Jewish bloodline through his mother, they would never have allowed him to speak in the synagogue or teach their young without the mark of the old covenant. Remember, the church is still reeling from this divisive issue!

Notice what Paul does, in verse 3b.

. . . and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

Many authors criticize Paul for allegedly compromising on this issue. After standing up to the Jews by allowing the Gentiles to join the church without being circumcised, he now seems to compromise by circumcising Timothy.

Let me simply say this, Paul was never opposed to circumcision; he *was* opposed to the belief that circumcision was necessary for salvation.

So, while circumcision was not important for Timothy's salvation; it was important for Timothy's ministry. He was now acceptable in Jewish synagogues throughout the world.

Strengthening the Saints – Expounding the Resolutions

Now look at verses 4 and 5.

Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.

So far, so good! This is the kind of ministry we would expect to hear about from Paul, right? There are new recruits for ministry; new people added to the churches in these cities. They are teaching and preaching and there is growth and development in the churches.

There is a saying, "You either evangelize or you fossilize." Well, Paul and his team are not standing still long enough to gather dust, much less fossilize.

Frustrated in Phrygia . . . Blocked in Bithynia – Encountering the Roadblocks

Paul's ministry is about to change, however!
Continue to verse 6.

They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia;

Wait a minute!! What do you mean, the Holy Spirit forbade Paul from speaking the word in Asia Minor?! Didn't they need to hear?!?! Do you mean to tell me that Paul has been told to avoid an entire continent?!

This is what can be called the sovereignty of God in evangelism. This is the sovereign strategy in the sharing of the gospel.

Now, I will fill you in on a secret that will emerge later in the text. God intends for Paul to go to Europe with the gospel – Paul simply does not know that yet.

I would love to know how the Holy Spirit forbade Paul. Even more, I would love to know why. The apostle Paul must have been mystified beyond words.

The word translated “forbidden,” is derived from the Greek word “kolos,” which means, “to cut short; to trim”. In other words, the missionaries are plowing ahead in one direction, and the Holy Spirit cuts them off. They try another turn to go to another small village, and they are cut off again. We are not told how, but we do know that the Holy Spirit did not allow any open doors for them in Asia Minor.

The reason we know the Holy Spirit did not, at this point, tell Paul the reason; that is, because He wanted Paul to go to the continent we know as Europe, is because of the next verse, verse 7.

and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go to Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them;

Can you see Paul and his team trying to turn the doorknob on these cities? They are locked out. They are confused; frustrated. This is different than any experience Paul and the others have ever encountered.

Isn't it great to know that even the apostle Paul was not always clear as to God's will for his life and ministry? Paul wanted to go east into Asia; God wanted Paul to go west into Europe.

One author writes,

In our lives, God will sometimes shut down an exciting ministry or allow obstacles in our paths . . . we can't imagine why God would shut some of the doors that He does. So we try harder. But when Jesus Christ closes a door, He merely has His sights on something better – something around the bend we can't see yet. For Paul, that something was Europe. Paul had planned to evangelize Asia, but for now, Asia was merely God's hallway for His men to pass through. Along the way they jiggled doorknobs and tested locks, but no doors opened . . . until they reached the very end of the corridor.

The end of that corridor was the westernmost tip of Asia Minor; a place Paul eventually reached – a city called Troas. It was a difficult journey covering several hundred miles. Nothing made sense to this missionary party – they had been blocked from going north, south, and east. They finally arrived at Troas, situated on the edge of the Aegean Sea. It was a dead

end; there was nowhere else to go; there was nothing to do but find shelter and get some sleep.

Now notice verses 8 and 9.

and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

This was not a dream, this was a supernatural vision; God designed this hologram. Paul witnesses a man standing and he is from Macedonia. We do not know how Paul knew that – perhaps the word “Macedonia” was blinking in the background. And the man is appealing to Paul, saying, “Come over and help us.”

Continue to verse 10.

When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Observations concerning God's timing

I took another look at Paul's experience and came up with a few observations related to God's timing. They include:

- Paul was not told when he started, where he would end up!
- Paul was repeatedly hindered from what he wanted to do without being told why. This was like Abraham, who went out not knowing where he was going (Hebrews 11:8). Do you feel like that?
- Paul was subjected to physical and emotional challenges without knowing how long his ordeal would last.

Application – What To Do When You Are Stopped!

What do you do when you come to your Troas – a dead end; no answers; frustration; closed doors; weariness? Let me suggest several things to do while you wait.

Begin by giving God the right to take His time

1. Begin by giving God the right to take His time.

I say that tongue-in-cheek because God has the right whether you give it or not.

I like the legend of the man who was granted an opportunity to talk with God. He said, “Lord, how long is a million years to you?”

God responded, “A million years is just a second to me.”

“Hmm . . . well, how much is a million dollars to you?”

The Lord said, “Oh, a million dollars is just a nickel to me.”

The man thought for awhile, and then, with a sly grin on his face, said, “Well, Lord, how about giving me a nickel then.”

The Lord, said, “Well, I sure will . . . it’ll be there in just a second.”

Our values; our timing; our thoughts are not God’s thoughts.

Had Paul stubbornly resisted the timing of the Holy Spirit, he would have stayed in Asia Minor and he would have missed another companion that would help him dearly. It is easy to miss, but if you notice verse 10 again, you see a shift that has not previously occurred in the book of Acts. It is the little word “we”. The author of Acts suddenly slips himself into the story. Casually, humbly, Luke informs his readers that he is now part of the drama. He will use the word “we” three times in the book of Acts.

Now, we know from other scripture that Luke indeed, was a traveling companion of Paul’s. In fact, as Paul lies in the Roman dungeon awaiting execution, he writes to Timothy and says, in II Timothy, chapter 4, verse 11a,

Only Luke is with me. . . .

How did Luke come to travel with Paul? We do not even know how they met in Troas. We do not know if Luke was already a believer. He probably was not. How did they meet?

We can only guess how Paul and Luke met, but I like the guess of one expositor of several generations ago. F. B. Meyer penned it this way:

Had Paul stayed months in the marketplaces of Asia, Europe might never have heard the gospel from his lips. However, and this is most important, an exacting march of 5-6 hundred miles over and through inhospitable territory would have exhausted already frail, Paul. The rugged terrain and high plateaus through which the

missionary party traveled on their way to Troas required some sort of medical attention once they arrived. When Timothy went in search of a doctor, he found Luke, and made history.

If the young doctor came to visit the needy traveler, he would talk with the patient . . . possibly returning several times. It is not too much to believe that the impact of Paul’s personality, and the thrilling quality of his gospel message, brought the physician to Christ.

It wasn’t long before he heard of Paul’s instructions to continue his journey. His new friend would most certainly be taxed to the limit – the inviting frontiers of Europe were both thrilling and menacing. There was a prison in Philippi and mobs in that city. What would this wonderful man do if his body and spirit were broken?

The more Dr. Luke considered these frightening possibilities, the more insistent became a whisper within his soul. Could there be a place for a doctor in that brave little group of Christian warriors? Could he preach with his hands while Paul preached with his voice? Could he visit the sick and the aged in the churches while his companion stood in the synagogues to proclaim the Master’s message?

We have no way of knowing how long these questions troubled the physician; we only know that, when Paul and his companions walked to the dock to board their ship, they were thrilled to see that doctor, bag in hand, hurrying to join their party.

What happened in Troas? Paul, by patiently waiting for God’s timing, found a lifetime companion – a medical doctor named Luke.

Believe by faith that God desires for you to discover His will

2. Believe by faith that God desires for you to discover His will.

When you were saved, God did not brush off His hands and say, “There, that does it for him.” That would be like taking a young man, who has just decided to become a pilot, placing him in the cockpit of a 757, and saying, “Congratulations on your decision to become a pilot – have a nice flight!”

Paul himself will later encourage the Colossians by writing, in chapter 1, verse 9b of that epistle, that it is God's desire for them to,

... be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

Be sure to look at your stops from three different angles

3. Be sure to look at your stops from three different angles.

Look up from your knees – the lens of prayer

- Look up from your knees – the lens of prayer.

More than anything, the best thing about praying with your head leaning against a closed door while waiting for other doors to open is that God finally gets your attention!

During those moments of desperation and dependency, know that, as James, chapter 1, verse 5, tells us,

... if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

So ask. And while you are asking . . .

Look carefully at the word – the lens of scripture

- Look carefully at the word – the lens of scripture.

Make sure your dilemma is not violating God's word. Make sure you are not doing something that

the word would not endorse. Make sure that you are not praying about something that God would not want to answer. Make sure you are praying about open doors that will maintain your commitment to Christ, your family, and your church.

Do not act before God in heaven, as if you are some kind of exception on earth. The Bible is the manual, so while you are waiting, try studying and meditating on it.

Look around for the wise – the lens of godly counsel

- Look around for the wise – the lens of godly counsel.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs, chapter 11, verse 14b, and again in chapter 24, verse 6b, that,

... in abundance of counselors there is victory.

Just make sure you are asking advice from godly people.

Before the Lord can turn you around and head you in another direction, He often has to completely stop you. And those potholes in the race track; those obstacles along the way that cause you to swerve and sweat are all part of His plan; part of the process. And the process is as important as reaching Europe was for Paul.

So now that God has your attention, fully give it to Him. Better yet, in times like Troas, give yourself afresh to Him. In that way, you can be prepared for His answer, whenever it comes.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/5/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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